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SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 20th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. ALOM (Bangladesh)
(Acting Chairman)

later: Mr. SENGWE (Zimbabwe)
(Chairman)

Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions: Mr. MSELLE

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In the absence of the Chairman, Mr. Alom (Bangladesh), Vice-Chairman, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

AGENDA ITEM 116: PROGRAMME BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM 1996-1997 (continued) (A/50/7/Add.16, A/51/7/Add.1 and A/C.5/50/57 and Add.1)

1. Ms. GOICOCHEA ESTENOZ (Cuba), supported by Mr. MOKTEFI (Algeria), Ms. INCERA (Costa Rica) (on behalf of the Group of 77 and China), Mr. MIRMOHAMMAD (Islamic Republic of Iran) and Mr. AMARI (Tunisia) expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that the Secretariat had not responded adequately to the questions raised during the general debate on the item. In particular, she recalled that, although the management of the vacancy rate was the responsibility of the Secretary-General, it was the responsibility of the General Assembly to set that rate. The item should remain under consideration until the Secretariat provided satisfactory written replies to the questions posed, at which time a decision could be taken on the matter in a formal meeting.

2. Mr. TAKASU (Controller) said that an effort had been made to provide available information in reply to the questions that had been posed. As to delays, restrictions, cancellations or postponements pertaining to activities and their impact, the information on the proposals by the Secretary-General was contained in part II of document A/C.5/50/57/Add.1 and in annexes I and II to document A/51/7/Add.1. Various reports also had been submitted describing how the Secretary-General would endeavour to finance additional mandates; the subject could be reviewed more thoroughly when the first budget performance report was submitted. As to the impact of the measures taken to enhance efficiency, the Efficiency Board had submitted additional information in reply to the questions posed by the Group of 77. Furthermore, information concerning the administration of posts, financing from other sources of posts which formerly were regular budget posts, the nationality of staff, the freeze in recruitment, promotions and the vacancy situation had to be obtained from departments and offices throughout the world, for which reason only the information available had been supplied; annex IX to document A/51/7/Add.1 contained a table detailing the status of posts referred to in General Assembly resolution 50/214.

3. With regard to the discrepancy among the regional commissions to which Iran had referred, the cost reduction percentage proposed for the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia was higher than that of the other regional commissions because that Commission, for various reasons, tended to have a higher vacancy rate, not because broader reductions were planned. The revised programme of work of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development for the biennium 1996-1997 adopted by the Trade and Development Board, which was discussed under budget section 10A in document A/C.5/50/57/Add.1, would be submitted in due course. Lastly, the Office of Human Resources Management already had provided information concerning staff who were awaiting placement and was prepared - as was he - to answer any other specific questions.

4. Ms. GOICOCHEA ESTENOZ (Cuba) said that the section of the report of the Board of Auditors (A/51/5, vol. I) concerning self-evaluation (paras. 269-273) indicated that evaluation activities during the past two bienniums had been inadequate. Accordingly, her delegation was concerned that the Secretariat was proposing to postpone, eliminate or restrict activities on the basis of such inadequate evaluations and the criteria underlying the proposals.

5. Mr. ODAGA JALOMAYO (Uganda) endorsed the views expressed by the Group of 77 and China and reserved the right to comment on the questions raised until written replies had been received. It was very confusing to hear the Controller refer to the report of the Efficiency Board when no information on its establishment or mandate was available. Since the Board operated under the authority of the Secretary-General, he should submit a report to the Fifth Committee. The Controller should include in his replies information on the system to enhance efficiency introduced by the Secretary-General and on whether the system did not in fact entail some costs for the Organization. Information was required concerning the costs incurred by the Efficiency Board, how it reported on those costs to the Committee and the contractual status of its members.

6. Mr. AMARI (Tunisia) thanked the Controller for his replies to some of the questions raised and said that the general debate on the item should not be concluded until satisfactory replies had been received to questions which had not yet been answered.

7. Ms. INCERA (Costa Rica), speaking on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, reiterated that the replies to questions should be submitted in writing and should contain the precise information requested. It was extremely important to receive the replies before informal consultations were held. Her own delegation wished to know the names and nationalities of the members of the Efficiency Board, which countries contributed to the fund established to finance it and the level of those contributions.

8. Mr. STOCKL (Germany) disagreed with the Cuban delegation that the Secretary-General was obliged to enforce the established vacancy rate and that he could not exceed it. The rate was a minimum objective and the Secretary-General had the discretion to achieve higher vacancy rates through attrition and early separation. The first report of the Advisory Committee (A/50/7) pointed to the need for balance in vacancies among the categories of posts. The Secretary-General should ensure that the vacancy rate at the base of the pyramid, i.e., at the P-2 and P-3 levels, was not high and that there were fewer vacancies at the intermediate or higher levels.

9. Ms. GOICOCHEA ESTENOZ (Cuba) said that although it was true that it was the Secretary-General's prerogative to manage the vacancy rate, the political agreement represented by General Assembly resolution 50/214 had been arrived at following a budget revision reflecting changes which had occurred in the vacancy rate, an issue to which the Advisory Committee referred in paragraph 24 of document A/50/7/Add.16. Matters relating to the vacancy rate must be agreed upon by Member States, since budget expenditures also were involved. By adopting its resolution 50/214, the General Assembly had decided, as the outcome of a political agreement, to authorize a number of posts over and above those

requested by the Secretary-General. It was unfortunate that the information concerning those posts was contained in a document of the Advisory Committee (A/51/7/Add.1) rather than in a report of the Secretary-General, who had the responsibility to provide it. Nevertheless, it should be noted that a number of the posts had not been filled, even though they had been established as a result of a negotiation process. The Secretariat should inform the Committee of the status of those posts as at the end of October 1996 and of the reasons why they had not been filled.

10. Mr. Sengwe (Zimbabwe), Chairman, took the Chair.

11. Mr. HANSON (Canada) said that the formal statement on behalf of Canada, Australia and New Zealand had clearly indicated that those delegations believed that the vacancy rate was a management tool which established an average rate for the biennium. He found it difficult to understand the implication that the vacancy rate was some kind of absolute limit. If that were the case, the Office of Human Resources Management could not, for example, agree to the voluntary retirement of staff, since that would increase the vacancy rate. The Charter of the United Nations conferred certain prerogatives on the Secretary-General with respect to the management of the Secretariat and they could not be ignored unless the General Assembly decided to amend the Charter in accordance with the appropriate procedures.

12. Mr. IRAGORRI (Colombia) agreed that the vacancy rate was, in principle, an administrative tool, as in a normal situation in which the Secretary-General had to be able to work with a specific rate in order to prevent a crisis if, for example, a staff member resigned from a post. Colombia respected the Secretary-General's prerogatives as an administrator in that regard. However, the vacancy rate ceased to be an administrative tool when it became a tool of financial policy designed to achieve a specified level of savings in the Organization, as had been the case when the General Assembly, by resolution 50/214, had reached a political agreement establishing a much higher vacancy rate than normal. Consequently, any modification of an unusual number of vacancies must be approved by the General Assembly, since the higher vacancy rate was not an administrative tool, but rather, a financial tool established on the basis of a political agreement.

13. Ms. GOICOCHEA ESTENOZ (Cuba) said she was well aware that the Secretary-General was the chief administrative officer of the Organization, under the Charter of the United Nations. Cuba had never considered the possibility of revising the relevant Article of the Charter. She agreed that the management of the vacancy rate was the prerogative of the Secretary-General. However, it was also true that the General Assembly had approved a specific vacancy rate by its resolution 50/214. As a result of the proposed savings of $154 million, it had been decided politically to maintain a vacancy rate of 0.8 per cent for General Service posts and 6.4 per cent for Professional posts, subject to review. Considering the manner in which the rates had been approved, and bearing in mind their relation to the budget, which had also been adopted by a decision of the General Assembly, any change in the vacancy rate would require the Assembly's approval, expressed in a resolution.

14. With respect to the means by which the vacancy rate was to be increased, which were described in paragraph 18 of document A/C.5/50/57, Cuba asked the Secretariat to report on how many people would be affected by each of the measures listed. It also wanted to know what level of savings would be achieved if the vacancy rate of 6.4 per cent remained unchanged.

15. Mr. MIRMOHAMMAD (Islamic Republic of Iran) recalled that the issue of the vacancy rate had already been discussed during the consideration of resolution 50/214 at the end of the General Assembly's fiftieth session. As the Cuban delegation had observed, any change in that rate must be approved by the General Assembly. Moreover, the Secretariat should give appropriate answers to the questions which had been posed.

16. The CHAIRMAN said he took it that the Committee did not wish to conclude its consideration of the item until the Secretariat had provided additional information in writing on the questions which had been posed.

17. It was so decided.

AGENDA ITEM 114: PROGRAMME PLANNING (continued)

Proposed medium-term plan for the period 1998-2001 (continued) (A/51/6 and A/51/16 (Parts I and II))

Programme 6. Africa: New Agenda for Development (continued)

18. Mr. ANDJABA (Namibia), after expressing his support for the statements made on behalf of the Group of 77 and China and the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries on the issue, emphasized the importance of development programmes, especially for Africa. The unanimous adoption, in 1991, of the United Nations New Agenda for the Development of Africa in the 1990s had constituted a recognition of Africa's continued efforts to forge its development process, and of the imperative need for enhanced partnership between Africa and the international community for social and economic development. Without that support, particularly with regard to increased financial flows to the continent and to the Economic Commission for Africa, which had been mandated to monitor, assess and follow up the implementation of action programmes for African development, that goal could not be achieved. He called upon the donor community to strive to reverse the decline in official development assistance.

19. The mid-term review of the implementation of the United Nations New Agenda for the Development of Africa in the 1990s had emphasized, inter alia, that the New Agenda remained an effective framework for enhanced cooperation between Africa and the international community, which was complemented by programmes such as the System-wide Plan of Action for African Economic Recovery and Development and the United Nations System-wide Special Initiative on Africa. It was necessary to strengthen the institutional capacity for the implementation of the New Agenda and for coordination and follow-up. It was also important to provide the Department of Public Information with adequate resources to enable it to promote global awareness of Africa's critical economic situation and of the efforts undertaken by African countries themselves. The Namibian delegation

endorsed the programme as proposed by the Secretary-General and amended by the Committee for Programme and Coordination.

Programme 7. Economic and social information and policy analysis

20. Mr. KELLY (Ireland), speaking on behalf of the European Union and the associate countries of Latvia, Poland and Slovakia, said that subprogrammes 7.3 and 7.4 were very similar and that it might be desirable to rationalize them. With respect to subprogramme 7.1, he agreed that, during the period covered by the medium-term plan, the Statistical Division should focus on the five main objectives listed. However, he wondered why the need to improve coordination and cooperation between the United Nations and other statistics-producing intergovernmental organizations had not also been clearly identified as an objective of subprogramme 7.1, as a way to avoid the overlapping of functions and duplication of work and to harmonize methods of gathering statistical data to make them more reliable and transparent. There might also be scope for appropriate intergovernmental review of a number of the mandates cited as the legislative basis for some of the subprogrammes, in order to determine their continued relevance.

21. Ms. PEÑA (Mexico) said that her delegation endorsed the conclusions and recommendations of the Committee for Programme and Coordination on programme 7, which appeared in paragraph 90 of document A/51/16 (Part II).

22. Mr. ELMONTASER (Libyan Arab Jamahiriya) said that he supported the delegations which felt that the trade system and the transfer of technology should be non-discriminatory, as noted in paragraph 85 of document A/51/16 (Part II). With respect to paragraph 7.10 (c) of subprogramme 7.4, he agreed with the delegations which had said that the effects of the coercive measures adopted unilaterally by some countries must be taken into account, as noted in paragraph 87 of document A/51/16 (Part II).

23. The CHAIRMAN said he took it that the Committee did not wish to conclude its consideration of programme 7 so that interested delegations could formulate observations on it.

24. It was so decided.

Programme 8. Development support and management services

25. The CHAIRMAN drew attention to paragraph 103 of the report of the Committee for Programme and Coordination, in which the latter recommended that the General Assembly should approve programme 8 with some modifications.

26. Ms. PEÑA (Mexico) proposed that the conclusions and recommendations of the Committee for Programme and Coordination should be included in the draft resolution to be prepared on the item under consideration.

27. Mr. KELLY (Ireland), speaking on behalf of the European Union and the associate countries of Latvia, Poland and Slovakia, said that reference should be made to the outcome of the General Assembly's resumed session on public administration and development, held in April 1996, and to how the Department

for Development Support and Management Services planned to focus its activities on the areas identified in General Assembly resolution 50/225. Subprogramme 8.2 should be reviewed in the light of programme 5, which dealt with sustainable development and was executed by the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development, in order to avoid any possible duplication of activities.

28. Ms. BUERGO RODRÍGUEZ (Cuba) said that her delegation reserved the right to speak when the Fifth Committee received the relevant information from the Second Committee on programmes 7 and 8, although, in principle, it supported the conclusions and recommendations of the Committee for Programme and Coordination on programme 8.

29. The CHAIRMAN said he took it that the Committee did not wish to conclude its consideration of programme 8, and suggested that it should proceed to consider programme 10.

30. It was so decided.

Programme 10. Environment

31. The CHAIRMAN drew attention to paragraph 122 of the report of the Committee for Programme and Coordination, in which the latter recommended that the General Assembly should approve programme 10 with some modifications.

32. Ms. PEÑA (Mexico) said that the conclusions and recommendations which appeared in paragraph 122 of the report were acceptable to her delegation, and proposed that they should be included in the draft resolution to be prepared on the item under consideration.

33. The CHAIRMAN suggested that the meeting should be adjourned so that delegations could prepare to consider the programmes.

34. It was so decided.

The meeting rose at 4.40 p.m.